Dr. ANNIE BESANT: A TRIBUTE

K. S. VENKATARAMANI

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To Mr

S. Gopalan M.A.,

with author's affectionate

regards

K. S. Venkataramani

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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A Day with Sambhu. (Talks to a Boy.)

Renascent India. (A Study of Indian Problems.)

TO

A. K. SITARAMA SHASTRI

Dr. ANNIE BESANT: A TRIBUTE

BY

K. S. VENKATARAMANI

SVETARANYA ASHRAMA
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I

THE present renascent movement is probably the biggest rise in Indian history since the days of the Buddha and Asoka. Whether the fruits will be gathered in plenty and variety in the ripening hour is beyond the power of the most daring prophet. But one thing is clear. The longing to do something and exalt the nation by deeds is intense. The air is

charged with a soaring idealism and a fervent desire to achieve. The sense of worship is exalted to a spiritual passion. The will to do, to act, stands at the highest to-day. That is always a rare and momentous mood for the Indian temperament. It has been fruitful in the past.

But will it materialise now ? Or will the clouds get scattered once again as it has happened so often in our history ? That is the eager question everywhere. Yes, it will materialise if the worship of ideas becomes the worship of work, songs fertilise into deeds. Then the

achievement will be as complete and renewing as the great ranascent rise which our land witnessed twenty-five centuries ago.

We have never been stirred to our depths so much as now. Every department of our life is feeling the stir of unrest and the touch of renewal. The unrest is creative, not the mere ripple of politics in the pond, but the stir of a New India in the making. The awakening is not vague and listless but is charged with a concrete desire to work for a living present. Can there be a purer testimony to a renaissance than this ?

Three great personalities have directed this movement till now. Swami Vivekananda, Dr. Annie Besant and Mahatma Gandhi, each giving the movement the impress of his or her own qualities as the Time-spirit and their own temperaments would allow. Dr. Besant's contribution to this national emergence and growth is valuable and realistic. Hers is the canalising genius of the irrigation engineer. She is both pioneering and provocative. She has quickened the blood circulation and the national metabolism. She has achieved it both by her words of eloquence and deeds of worth.

The tragedy at the present moment is that there is nobody now to carry on her line of work, while Mahatmaji is continuing on even a larger scale the idealistic work of awakening the country which Swami Vivekananda had begun.

Swami Vivekananda was the conch-blower of renascent India. In him the spiritual elements gained perfection and a charm because of his fine appreciation of political ends and social aims. When the earth and the sky were still shrouded in darkness and doubt he sang bravely and in a tranquil voice, the voice of Truth, in the misty morning

air of *margali* nights, like a true conch-blower, when all were asleep, the glory of the coming dawn. His was the ecstatic utterance of the prophet who sees the Vision. His was the clarion call to the sleepers to "Awake! Arise!" But he died young.

Swami Vivekananda was something like a nature-force, an earthquake whose tremor is felt all over, a gleam of lightning which lights the darkest gloom in the forest-tracks. Mahatma Gandhi also is, at least, as much a nature-force. He is something like a cloud-burst or snow-fall on the Himalayan heights,

that sends mighty floods down the Ganges, which move gliding down, lisping the rare babble of liquid life, seeking at every bend and curve of the course the constructive and the fertilising touch of the irrigation engineer.

God who gave us the Gandhian flood in the river has not yet vouchsafed to us simultaneously the Irrigation Engineer, to canalise this release of national energy into constructive statesmanship so that the flood may bless even the remotest village in the parched-up plains of Hindustan. Once I had hoped that the late C. R. Das was the

man to harness simultaneously the awakened idealism and release of energy and direct it into the ploughed acres and sown fields. It was God's will to cut off C. R. Das in the prime of life as it was His will to cut off two centuries ago the Peshwas one by one at a very early age.

Had Dr. Besant been of Indian birth and forty years younger, she would have made an ideal ally of Mahatmaji and a constructive statesman of the first rank who would have translated the ideal into the accomplished real, the finest type of Swaraj for India. But to me,

this wistful regret has its own charms and lessons. The sum of her qualities can give us the clue for constructive work. Her long and strenuous life is indeed a great example to us, for hers are just the qualities that would fertilise the Indian temperament.

II

Dr. Besant is a *karma yogi* who applies frankly her powers in the first instance to social and humanitarian ends. Mahatmaji also is a *karma yogi* but his final quest is fundamentally different. He is

primarily interested in the individual, and his refinement and evolution, while Dr. Besant fixes her compassionate eye on the collective good and the beneficent working of institutions. Organisation, working beneficently for the common good of man is life to Dr. Besant, and organisation, however healthy, as a final state of affairs, is death to Mahatmaji and to every true Hindu.

This humanitarian view of life has given to Dr. Besant the religious fervour and energy for all self-less work. She is a tireless worker, with faith in work as the great, cleansing agent of life, a worker

with love and purity, self-less and detached. All her great qualities, even the *atma gunas* in her case, cease to have an independent existence of their own, but serve and slave to feed the ceaseless fire of love of work. This, no doubt, slightly upsets the balance, tilts the axis of life, and makes uneven the harmonies and gives us the impression of the defects of her qualities.

Action is the greatest urge in her life, strenuous, sympathetic, self-willed, self-sustained action. Fighting is not the motive of her action but a necessary implement in this

conflicting world. Even love and peace in their desire for full self-expression will have to fight. It is more compassion, a humanitarian tenderness against the cruel, age-long social wrongs to many, than love—unrelated compassion is love—in its static or dynamic form that pulls her to work. Love even in its most active form is catholic and quiescent. Its propaganda is ethical, never political. Love is even and reacts equally both to the high and the low, the rich and the poor, while compassion responds quickly to the miseries of the poor, but views with distrust even the virtues of the rich.

Dr. Besant is in intellectual reach, if not in realisation, a true *advaitin*. Right or wrong does not matter provided you are self-less. For, right or wrong is only relative to given conditions and has no final value. Evolution reckons only activity. And all true activity is impersonal, is constructive, and has no final relationship with right and wrong. And all true activity is the work of the worker who is self-less and detached.

Decisiveness, and courage which follows decisiveness, like heat that follows light, are her great assets. Once she decides she always goes

about her work with roaming joy and freedom like the tempest, but a tempest which raises and brings in its wake not a sand-storm but the monsoon clouds of plenty.

She is a fighter, but not a fighter for the sterile joy of it. She is primarily a worker with the self-imposed duty, after thought and conviction, of cleansing the Augean stables. But she is a worker who finds that she has to fight courageously, however reluctantly, against all the odd things in the way of her work ; something like the first freshes in the Cauvery that have to sweep

down its whirling eddies, all dirt and lumber, dried twigs and leaves, rotten trunks of dead trees that block the way and scar the sandy bosom of the river bed.

Dr. Besant's mode of approach to life is essentially Indian. Her mind is spiritual in the best cultural sense, not in the pure Indian sense of utter communion, lonely, devout, tragic and sublime, divorced from land and life. It is spiritual in that it has gained a mastery, a kind of *yogic* control over the senses and the appetites, and the sources of energy that feed daily life, its exaltations and depressions.

She is one of the first to rediscover the unity of India in her cultural and spiritual life, and to work for it through religious awakening, and show us the priceless treasures of our own inheritance lying in sealed cases in our ancestral vaults. On the whole her long life is one lived in the great *Gita* tradition though handicapped by the dragging weight of the civilisation of her own birth. The valuable formative period of her life was wasted in one endless struggle and effort to break the bonds of tradition and go out in freedom in search of Truth.

Her greatest contribution to the making of a New India is in the direction of education and politics. She brought to bear on both these vital problems of national life her characteristic energy and a decisive, vigorous and organising mind, at a time when values were confused and all longings were yet unrelated to action. Nay she gave both definiteness and direction to vague aims and aspirations both of the people and the leaders.

The Central Hindu College is a proud, pioneering achievement in the ancient city of Benares at a time when the impulse to rear an

institution and carry on education on national lines was very weak. The initial hard work she did with untiring energy, with love and patience. And the magnificent Hindu University is the best tribute to Dr. Besant.

Her political work and vision are even more concrete and comprehensive. She has marvellously quickened the date of Indian Freedom by her whirlwind campaign for Home Rule. None has realised better than Dr. Besant that the welfare of India lies in the healthy functioning of the Indian village as an autonomous and efficient unit.

It is our misfortune that cross-currents in our political stream have run ashore her fine bark, the Commonwealth of India Bill. But no enduring constitution for India which reflects the glories of the past yielding at the same time the emotion to work for a living present and a certain future, can be framed without basing its foundations on the seven lakhs of Indian villages.

Dr. Besant's matchless energy, her superb driving-power, her unfailing courage, her sense of realities, her knowledge of the temperament and needs of the collective man, her comprehensiveness coupled with

an amazing grasp of details are surely assets to any political worker. And the Indian outlook has special gains to gain by the fertilisation of such qualities in the national temperament. It is only a great leader who can rouse a people, divided and weak, to some great and united work, and leave the impress of his qualities in the thoughts, traditions and habits of action of his age, and perhaps, even thereafter, making them part of the riches of the national inheritance.

Dr. Besant's full life has no doubt a message for us all. We have never lacked in wisdom but only

in the will to follow the wise and the self-less. Her will-power is a great example. Her message to renascent India is : organise, canalise, co-ordinate and work ; till and prune, prune and till ; water and manure, manure and water ; cut off the dried roots and the rotten branches, work hard and work selflessly ; once again the ancient orchard will bloom to life, bear fruits all the more luscious for the age of the trees ; work for the betterment of the social conditions, work on lines of no exploitation, work with generosity and love, and a religious fervour applied to mundane affairs ;

work for the uplift of all. Renascent India will always gratefully honour such work.

This philosophy of life, the primary bias of a humanitarian, gives to Dr. Besant the compassion of a Buddha, the monarchical and the beneficent temperament of an Asoka, the intellect and organising talents of a St. Paul or Ignatius Loyola, and an acute patriotism, courageous and concrete in feeling, for the service of man and the well-being of humanity for which there is no exact parallel in history. If she is not likely to attain immortality in the same rank as those

already mentioned, it will not be for lack of sincerity or vision in the quest of Truth or love of humanity, or talented energy to work out her convictions and ideals. But the machine spirit of the age in which she was born denied her the suitable background for steady, synthetic work in the realm of the Spirit in which she was most deeply interested. And the political unrest of transitional India, a foreign land in which she chose to work the best of her riper years called forth more the combative than the constructive will in her. These two prime causes have necessarily impaired her

unique personality and her life work.

Dr. Besant had a keen and generous insight into human nature as it works in the sphere of action but not so equally a keen or clear appreciation of what it longs to be in repose in the realm of the imponderable spirit. In the active and multitudinous demands of the glorious present she did not care to realise intimately the higher longings of the individual man against the bondage of an organised society and the spell of sterile over-work which it always means.

Dr. Besant had great knowledge of human nature in mass action. She

was the most wary shepherdess who could protect the frail flock with singular combative skill from wolves, and wolves in the clothing of lambs. But of new pastures for them to feed upon, she had only a vague feeling of wide meadows on the other side of the river in some far-off valley.

Dr. Besant had executive courage to a marvellous degree. But God had denied her, and the civilisation and the social organisation in which she was born denied her, meditative courage and intuitional originality, which alone give one a glimpse of the nature of Reality. Thus with all her superb endowments, she has

very narrowly missed the first rank of the immortals. But her life itself is a classic adventure and testimony to the wonder and greatness that is in man.

But there is no doubt that hers is a lasting name in our own history. She is one of the greatest women for all time. She is the pioneer of the nineteenth century and an example to the twentieth. Her life is the greatest adventure one has known in quest of Truth. She is the most sincere humanitarian of the century. Her mystic glands continually poured into the stream of her compassionate blood an aching

affection for humanity and a fevered throb for the well-being of man. She lived her strenuous eighty years of life in the highest moods of a creative rapture and unrest of work. Has any one, man or woman, a finer record of self-less and devoted work to present before the Maker or to one's own generation ?

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